THE RHETORIC OP GRACE AND THE VISION OF GRACE:

JOSEPH S ITTLER2 S THEOLOGY OF NATURE

AS AN INVITATION TO SEE AS WELL AS TO HEAR

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Somewhere beyond the midpoint of Joseph Sittier's little classic, Essays on Nature and Grace, the careful reader can detect a subtle shift of sensibility. The accent of Sittier's discourse modulates from the act of hearing to the act of seeing. This shift is of critical significance for the theology of nature, to which Sittier dedicated himself for so long and with such compelling insight. This rich sensibility of hearing and seeing is worthy of our most thoughtful attention, as we seek to appropriate and explicate Sittier's theology of nature with critical but grateful appreciation.

I. The Sensibility of Seeing and the Theology of Nature:

The Erne rgence of a Theme

Sittier begins his sometimes meandering reflections in that musefully argued volume with the announcement that the "rhetoric of grace" must be made congruent with the potentiality and the actuality of the "artifactual world of operations" characteristic of modern techological society.(1) The doctrine of grace, he is suggesting, must be expanded to encompass the world of nature, now so sorely burdened and desecrated by an often mindless human exploitation.

"Might it be possible, along with such reinterpretation," Sittier asks, "to recover and release such an understanding and

celebration of grace as shall locate its presence and power and hope within man's life in the world-as-creation as well as within man's hearing and receiving of grace through the Word and sacrament of forgiveness?"(2) Then Sittier proceeds to listen anew to the witness of the Word of God, above all as that witness is mediated by the letters of Colossians and Ephesians.

By the time his several streams of meander!ng thoughts have come together fluently in his final essay, the sensibility has noticeably changed. It is a shift in emphasis from hearing to seeing, from exploring and expanding on the biblical rhetoric of Grace to proclaiming and celebrating the biblical vision of Grace. "The community of the people of God...," he tells us, "are a people caught and held by a vision of a King, a kingdom, and a consummation -- and by the massive contexts of culture, history, nature, as fields of its holy disturbance." (3)

Sittier suggests in this connection that it is no accident that utopias have been formulated in the milieu of the Christian faith. Utopias have to do with a vision. Yet there is a decisive difference, he maintains: "Utopias owe their character and force to the vigor of the 'see what is possible!'," while "the Christian vision" of what is possible "is engendered both by the realities of human existence and the promises of the God of its faith."(4) This "vision of the New Creation is a product of God who is affirmed in faith to be a Creator of the world, Redeemer of the world, and Sanctifier of the world." (5) Still, the critical point of interest here, as we reflect on Sittier's thought, is that, as he emphasizes, both utopian thinking and Christian theology project visions of reality.

A. universal vision, indeed, is precisely what this world of "human crisis in ecology" (6) needs for the sake of its own survival and wellbeing, according to Sittier. As he explains:

> This effort to draw our regard for the worId-as-nature into organic relation with the reality of grace is not a merely theoretical exercise: its intention is practical. Unless some

> huge, primarily religious, and commanding vision of the future of the world can seize, release and exalt our spirits free of our unregarding, arrogant, and ultimately suicidal operations with the creation, we shall continue to be bombarded by the awesome data of ecological disaster, but remain unsupplied with a theological indicative as big as the issue and an ethicality unexpanded to appropriate dimensions. (7)

This shift from the rhetoric of Grace to the vision of Grace, from the sensibility of hearing to the sensibility of seeing, might not seem all that remarkable, at first glance. For, one might ask, has not Sittier shifted the accent of his discussion precisely as the Scriptures do, when they shift our attention from this world to the next, from the valley of the shadows to the coming of the consummated Kingdom of God at the heights of Mount Zion? The Scriptures themselves evidently are shaped by this two dimensionsal sensibility of hearing and seeing.

So St. Paul. In this earthly pilgrimage we walk by faith, Paul suggests (II Cor. 5:7). And that faith, for him, is totally dependent on the preached word (Ro. 10:14), so much so chat Paul can virtually identify the two, as when he speaks of "the hearing of faith" (Gal. 3:2). There i_s seeing in this life, he seems to allow. That seeing has Christ as its spiritual object. Those who do not have blinded minds, Paul says, know the glory of God in the face of Christ (II Cor. 4:6). But this seeing, as Paul understands it, very much has its limitations. In this life we see through a glass darkly. Still, when the time of the Last Day does arrive, according to Paul, then the people of faith shall see perfectly, face to face. (I Cor. 13:12) Paul urges his hearers, accordingly, not to look to "the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen" (II Cor. 4:18), chat is, to the things that are to come.

Such, in broad compass, is the biblical dialectic of hearing and seeing, as we see it coming to expression in Paul's theology. Although seeing in its perfected form is reserved for the

Eschaton — this is all the more apparent in the Book of Revelation, where John the Seer envisions a New Heavens and a New Earth -- although, furthermore, the people of faith are first and foremost hearers of the Word in this life: they do, nevertheless, see the unseeable in this life, in some measure. Call this the seeing of faith.

Perhaps the most powerful statement of this kind of seeing faith is expressed christologically in the Gospel of John: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth: we have beheld his glory...." (Jn. 1:14) A more subtle, but no less compelling expression of the same motif is Jesus' testimony concerning how God "clothes the grass of the field": "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin: yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Mt. 6:28-29)

It is interesting, in this respect, that the God depicted in the first chapter of the Bible begins the whole economy of creation, redemption, and sanctification by speaking the world into being, but not without seeing, with every creative act, that the fruits of his creativity are good and, indeed, taken together as a whole, that they are "very good." The sensibility of hearing and seeing thus seems to shape the Bible's witness to God, as well as its witness to humankind and to nature.

I want to suggest in this essay that Joseph Sittier's theology of nature is indeed attuned to the Scriptures in this respect. His thought at this point represents no departure from the matrix of biblical faith. On the contrary, that is precisely why Sittier's theology of nature is so important for us in these times of global environmental crisis. This particular faithfulness to the Bible on Sittier's part is one of the many imaginative, biblically informed characteristics of his discourse that succeeding generations of Christians will be well advised to learn and to treasure, especially since the call for an ecology of faith is being issued from so many quarters these days, and rightly so, with constantly increased tones of urgency. For

biblical faith, as Sittier knew, the Grace of God has its own characteristic experiential dialectic: Grace elicits the seeing of faith, in some measure, as well as the hearing of faith. And that insight is of critical importance for any viable theology of nature.

To underline the significance of this observation, I want to mention what I take to be a commonplace phenomenological truth, which Sittier, I believe, instinctively took for granted. It has to do with the interconnectedness of all things, which of course is the primary insight of all ecological thinking.

Hearing is the mode of connection, par excel lence, between persons. Persons might touch or see one another, or even smell one another. But most characteristically, persons speak with each other. Persons enter into dialogue with one another. This dialogue is the essence of authentic human interconnectedness, as Martin Buber showed classically in his prose poem, I and Thou. (8) Seeing, on the other hand, is more characteristically the mode of connection — although not exclusively so — between persons and all other earthly creatures. Even Buber, for all his deep panderings of his I-Thou relationship with a tree, could not imagine the "I" speaking with the tree as a "Thou" and then the tree responding in kind,, (9) The I-Thou relationship with the tree, as Buber envisions it, remains at the threshold of speech. The same is true, Buber suggests, for our interconnectedness with the higher animals, even though relationships of this kind can be of a much more subtle kind.(10) The I-Thou relationship with the tree, in Buber's view, is sustained primarily by sight — a very special kind of sight, to be sure, a contemplative seeing charged with wonder, but sight nevertheless.

Now a biblically informed, existentially compelling theology of nature will as a matter of course identify and celebrate the interconnectedness of all things, of persons with persons, surely, but also of persons (both God and humans) with the world of nature. It would seem to follow, then, that a viable theology of nature will as a matter of course be predicated on the

sensibility of seeing, as well as the sensibility of hearing, in order best to illuminate the interconnectedness of persons with nature, as well as persons with each other.

A corollary of that observation is this. A theology that is predicated on the hearing of faith, exclusively or even chiefly, will in all likelihood be a theology that will not readily be able to offer a forceful account of the interconnectedness of all things. If we are to articulate a persuasive ecological theology, in other words, the rhetoric of Grace will perforce have to find expression also in the vision of Grace. The theologian must see, as well as hear. Otherwise there will be no interconnectedness of any import, theologically speaking, between persons and the creatures of nature. The natural world will be known fundamentally not in its interconnectedness with God and humankind, but in its disjunction, in its otherness, which is to say, essentally as an alien world.

Such a scenario has in fact been played out in our theological history. Indeed it has been played out most vividly in Sittier's own Lutheran tradition.

II. The Sensibility of Hearing and the Theology of Nature:

The Case of Luther and the Lutherans

While Martin Luther may or may not have actually had the celebrated Tu r me r l eb n i s , historically speaking, when the revolutionary Reformation message of justification by faith alone was revealed to him as he pondered the first chapter of Romans, it is surely true that that story accurately portrays the unfolding experiential logic that lay behind his revelatory d i scove ry .

The culture into which Luther was born had been built as a glorious cathedral, according to highest aspirations of human reason. But wherever Luther looked he saw corruption and the

power of the Devil. When he looked at the Church, in particular, he saw much worldly pomp, and little theological substance. The best and the brightest of his day seemed to have sold their souls in order to gain every conceivable visible accoutrement of power. There were signs, too, as Luther perceived them, that the untutored masses were lusting for the establishment of some visible kind of Kingdom, perhaps by initiating a violent uprising, in the name of Christ the King.

In the meantime, sensitive souls, such as Luther's, could find no lasting consolation, no peace before God, no certainty of their salvation, as they suffered under the relentless pressure of the medieval penitential system. They found themselves adrift and bereft, terrorized by the thought of an avenging Deity on high, in a world that in so many respects seem to be damned. The glorious cathedral of the Middle Ages had thus become for Luther and for many of his contemporaries a kind of prison, which he believed, on the basis of firsthand experience, could only leave the souls of the faithful forever tormented.

Luther's response to the crisis in which he found himself and his world was in essence this. He shut his eyes, and he listened. He refused to countenance all the signs of worldly glory and churchly vainglory. He distanced himself radically from what he perceived to be the world of sin, the flesh, and the Devil, in order to listen anew to the Word of God in its radical freshness, freed from the overlay of worldly speculations which had, in his view, muffled its witness for so long. In this sense, hearing was the U r e r l^e b n i s , the generating experiential matrix, of the Lutheran Reformation. This surely is the fundamental reason why Luther developed his theology as a theology of the Word of God, nothwithstanding the impact of other factors, such as his training as a Scripture scholar or the emergence around him of a new, much more verbal culture, whose symbol was the printing press. (11) The Reformation began, theologically speaking, with an act of closed eyes and open ears, in the midst of a profound and thoroughgoing cultural and spiritual crisis.

It was while listening to the Word of God, disengaged from the claims of his culture and his spiritual heritage, that Luther heard the great consolation, "The lust shall live by faith." With this experience of hearing he found liberation and peace. It was an experience of the my ^£££.i_um_£r erne n d um for Luther. Its impact never left him. Its impact delivered him not only from despair, but it provided him with a sensibility which was then to be the matrix of his every theological utterance. Luther's theology was forever to be a theology of hearing, a theology of the Word of God.

Luther virtually said as much himself, on numerous occasions. "A right faith," he once wrote, "goes right on with its eyes closed: it clings to God's Word; it follows that Word; it believes that Word." (12) Again, he stated: "The ears are the only organ of the Christian." (13) And: "Nothing can be more beautiful in the eyes of God than a soul that loves to hear His Word." (14) And then this:

> Among all gifts the gift of the Word is the most valuable. For if you take this away, it is like taking the sun away from the earth.... For only the Word keeps a joyful conscience, a gracious God, and all of religion, since out of the Word, as from a spring, flows our entire religion. (15)

Luther came to know the Grace of God by hearing, and since that remained the most charged religious experience of his life, his dogmatic utterances and his pastoral directives all lifted up the experience of hearing the Word as the singlemost important foundation of the Gospel truth.

This was no less true of Luther's teaching about the sacraments, where one might have expected, if anywhere, to encounter a shift of sensibility, from the moment of hearing to the moment of seeing. The sacraments, after all, have visible elements. But Luther took up the Augustinian motif that the sacraments are "visible Words," and took it up with a passion. "You should know," he stated in one characteristic utterance,

"chat the Word of God is the chief thing in the sacrament." The Word is to the elements, he explained, as the soul is to the body. (16)

On the basis of the _Ur_e_r_l_e_b_ni_s of hearing faith, with eyes closed, Luther also turned against his theological opponents, both those on the right and those on the left. On the right he saw the rationalists. If there ever was such a thing as a "medieval synthesis," and if that synthesis could be illustrated architecturally in terms of the Gothic cathedral, (17) then we might venture to suggest that speculative reason was the cement that held all the stones of the cathedral together. Luther challenged the validity of speculative reason, again and again, on the basis of his theology of the Word, and to this extent he contributed to the destruction of grand ediface of medieval thought. "The Gospel truly shines in the dead of night and in darkness," he once stated, "for all human reason is mere error and blindness and the world itself is nothing but a realm of darkness. Now in this darkness God has kindled a light, namely, the Gospel, to enable us to see and walk, as long as we are on earth, until the dawn comes and the day breaks forth." (18)

Luther also took on his opponents on the left in much the same manner, on the basis of the Word. Some of these so-called enthusiasts, it will be remembered, were espousing claims that by special inspiration they had been called to establish the Kingdom of God visibly on earth. "I fear that more of these enthusiasts will come," he observed, in a characteristic statement:

> confused, wrapped up in their thoughts, foolish, stubbornly clinging co their own view, and despising the Word of God. This is why I have always with the greatest diligence exhorted men co read Scripture and to hear the spoken Word that we may deal with the God who has revealed Himself and is speaking to us , and may in every way avoid the God who is silent and hidden in majesty. (19)

That Luther also approved of the removal of images from the church buildings of his time, although not of the use of violence in doing so, will therefore comes as no surprise. (20) On occasion Luther could speak highly of images in the churches, but he generally did so only if those images had an 'evident pedagogical purpose. Some of the faithful learn to grasp the Word more fully, in other words, with the help of pictures that illustrate biblical events and stories. But for the most part Luther preferred to think of the church building, in his words, as a "mouth-house." Hence images were properly to be set aside, for only an ancillary function.

The earliest example in all Europe of a surviving church building designed and built within the Reformation milieu, the small Schloss Kapelle in Torgau, Germany, was dedicated by Luther in 1534. (21) It would not be too much to say that this building is a superbly designed mouth-house, with the space cleared to facilitate proclamation and listening, while the few images that were introduced were of obvious pedagogical not contemplative purpose. The elevated pulpit that dominates that space surely and dramatically announces the whole building's raison d'etre.

This journey into the thought-world of Martin Luther has been important for our purposes because it reminds us how deeply rooted and all-pervasive the sensibility of hearing was for Luther -- and doubtless for many of his followers, down to our own time. Not only was hearing the Urerlebnis of his revolutionary theological insights, it also offered him the basis for attacking his opponents, both on the right and on the left. Luther clung to the Word of God because of its liberating role in his own spiritual pilgrimage. But he also held firmly to the Word of God for polemical reasons.

Self-consiously, moreover, Luther characteristically juxtaposed the act of hearing over against the act of seeing. Seeing, he often seemed to assume, provides access only to the larva Dei, to the mask of God in this world, whereas hearing opens the way for the believer to receive an immediate kind of

commiunication from the Lord, the viva vox evangelj^i. Hence he wanted images removed from the hearts of the faithful, and from their church buildings as well, for the most part. Seeing, as such, Luther seemed to be convinced, was not a way to encounter God. On the contrary, if anything, seeing for him was the way of self-assertion, either by the works of rational speculation or by the works of morals and merits.

Luther apparently took it for granted, with many of his time and before, that hearing is the passive sensibility, while seeing is the active sensibility.(22) Hearing, then, is in this respect appropriate to the experience of Grace, according to the fundamental assumptions of Luther's thought, for it undergirds the provenience of Grace. Seeing, on the other hand, in this perspective, is an active outreach!ng of human sensibility, and therefore will constantly prompt the soul to trust in the fruitless speculations of reason or in the futile righteousness of works. Seeing, as Luther thought of it, apparently was a way for the subject to take control, not a way to bow down helplessly, relinquishing all aspirations to control one's own destiny or to establish one's own righteousness. for many reasons, then, Luther as a matter of course wanted to discourage or even deny any substantive influence on his thought from the side of the sensibility of seeing.

The apex of Luther's polemic against seeing, and in defense of hearing, was undoubtedly his charged teaching about the theology of glory, over against the theology of the Cross. The theology of glory, for Luther, stood for everything that he so violently opposed: worldly grandeur in the church, instead of biblical substance, visible pretensions of power in the world, instead of the weakness of the Cross, dependence on works for salvation rather than on faith, reason and speculation in the church rather than trust and faithfulness, an ethics of self-aggrandizement rather than an ethics of good order. What the eyes should rightly see, Luther said in so many ways, is the suffering and the death of Christ, while, at the same time, the ears must hear the Word and the heart believe, so that the

faithful might know that in the weakness of the Cross God has redeemed his people.

For Luther, seeing is not believing. For Luther, seeing, on the contrary, is a profound threat to believing. Seeing is the way to the theology of glory. Hearing is believing. Hearing is the way to the theology of the Cross. Hearing is the way to authentic communion with God, through the Cross. Hearing, therefore, not seeing, is the way to salvation.

It must therefore be reckoned as a total surprise that we meet a rich theological apperception of nature in Luther's thought. For the household of nature is surely no mouth-house, as the church was, for Luther. The believer cannot not hear sermons on 1us cification by faith from the birds of the field or the cows in the barn. The stars and the moon, the hills and the forests, the wheat and the corn fields, which so fascinated Luther, obviously do not proclaim the Word of God, not in any recognizable sense surely. The chief way to encounter the works of God in nature is to___see them, and that is really not permitted by the parameters of Luther's hearing faith. But see those works he did, nevertheless.

Luther depicts God as being "with all creatures, flowing, and pouring into them, filling all things." (23) Luther marvels at a grain of wheat: If we really understood it, he says, we would die of wonder. (24) When I truly grasp the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God in this world, according to Luther, "all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before"(25) . He even imagined the world of his present experience to be the time when the new life of the world to come had begun to dawn. Now, with a renewed knowledge of the creation made possible by our faith, he says, by God's mercy "we can begin to recognize His wonderful works and wonders also in the flowers when we ponder his might and his goodness." (26)

The last word of Luther about nature is therefore an ambiguous word. It would appear that the exclusive dominance of

the sensibility of hearing in his thought would allow him to entertain no encounters with God in the world of nature. For there is no preacher there. But, in fact, Luther's spirituality and also his reflective theology show signs of a rich apperception of God in nature. He also takes the human body very seriously, along with the tangibility of the sacramental elements. The finite is capable of the infinite (find turn capax Infiniti), in Luther's view. That is a fundamental principle of his proto logy, his chris to logy, his soteriology, and his eschatology. For Luther, God is wondrously and gloriously "in, with, and under" all things.

Apparently, then, given his rich theology of nature, the sensibility of seeing does in fact shape Luther's theology at least in some subliminal way, notwithstanding the fact that he depends so exclusively, in a self-conscious way, on the sensibility of hearing.

It would take us too far afield to trace the story of what happened to this ambiguity in Luther's thought as it was bequeathed to his theological successors. I have tried to do that elsewhere .(27) Suffice to say that with the rise of modern industrial and technological society, particularly with the ascendancy of the mechanical view of nature and the emergence of the aggressive spirit of captialism in the culture at large, the theological heirs of Luther found good reason to resolve the ambiguity clearly and firmly: to resolve it in favor of persons, they thought, and over against the world of nature.

Many of Luther's successors would therefore have nothing, or next to nothing, to say of nature. Theological discourse about nature came to be forbidden, by default, if not explicitly. The theological heirs of Luther as a general rule handed nature over to the scientists or the entrepreneurs, and sometimes to the poets or the painters. Meanwhile, back in the theological schools, theologians writing in the Reformation tradition developed a new theology of personalism, which was shaped by the philosophy of Kant, influenced by the subjectivity of pietism,

and then set over against what was mo re an d more perceived to b e a n ali en world of nature.

The theology of the Word has become all the more rooted i n the depths of the contemporary Lutheran soul , it is important to note, as a result of the Lutheran tradition' s encounter with National Socialism in. Germany in the first half of this century. Adolf Hitler and his kind, after all, sought to establish a new, visible domination of the world, on the basis of a new, "purified" Nordic mythos of nature. And some Lutheran theologians in Germany at the time seemed to be willing to lend credence to the whole Nazi mythos of nature by espousing a new interest of their own in the theology of creation.

Against these demonic claims, the Confessing Church rose up in resistance, opposed to every "natural theology." The Confessing Church was driven by a new theology of the Word of God, born of the Theology of Crisis. The confessors of the Barmen Declaration shut their eyes on the claims of the s oc io-spi ritual reality of their time, as Luther had done in his time, and, again like Luther, listened to the Word of God anew and with radical devotion.

Call this the triumph of the sensibility of hearing in the modern Reformation tradition. The seeing was left, by and large, to the scientists and the entrepreneurs, and to some extent to the artists. The existentialist theology of Rudolf Bultmann and the dogmatic theology of Karl Barth are only two of the most prominent examples of the triumph of the sensibility of hearing in the Reformation tradition in our own century. This rigorously consistent Reformation theology of the Word, juxtaposed over against every theology of nature, became the dominant expression of Reformation thinking about nature in the modern West — and still is in many respects.

Within the pale of North American Lutheranism today, for example, one can scarcely pick up a theological book, journal, or popular magazine and not encounter the theology of the Word

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prominently displayed. And, although the sacraments are mentioned with high frequency along side of the Word in such publications, it would appear that the sacraments are widely, if not exclusively, understood by Lutherans today, as Luther did, as "visible Words." It would appear that the triumph of the sensibility of hearing in the tradition of Luther has been nearly c omp l e t e .

Anyone, therefore, who would tamper with the theology of the Word, particularly any Lutheran, would be in danger of unleashing a whirlwind of polemics. Any revisionist must immediately be prepared to hear charges that what he or she is making possible is the birth of a new theology of glory, a new theology of works, and indeed possibly a new theology of subservience to demonic social forces.

III. The Sensibility of Hearing,the Sensibility o_£ Seeing , and the Theology of Nature:the Invitation from Sittier

That Joseph Sittier should call, variously, for a new theology of nature in the years after World War II, a theology that in some significant measure was rooted in a new and more catholic sensibility of seeing as well as hearing, and do so from within the tradition of Martin Luther, could have done nothing else than send shock waves through the hearts of faithful Lutheran theologians and other Lutheran leaders who first began to hear what he had to say.

But what Sittier realized, with amazing foresight, and what many of his early and latterday critics have never realized, is that with the emergence of the global environmental crisis, which is threatening the very physical survival of the human species, the heroic epoch of a Reformation theology predicated chiefly on hearing faith had begun to lose its viability. Hearing faith certainly stood Luther in good stead, when he confronted the Papacy and the enthusiasts. Hearing faith certainly stood neo-Lutheran thinkers, such as Rudolf Bultmann, in good stead,

when they made incisive claims of faith to protect the integrity of personal existence in a world of sometimes demonic objectification. Hearing faith, likewise, certainly stood the confessors of the Barmen Declaration in good stead whey they took their stand against Hitler. But can hearing faith alone stand the theologians of the Church in good stead when they face up to the enormities of the lace twentieth-century environmental crisis and the ecological ravages of the creature who is best described, as Sittier often said, as homo operator? Is not something more required, some broader, more catholic theological horizon than the traditional theology of the Word?

It would be too much to claim, surely, that Joseph Sittier was another Martin Luther. Today, few people know Sittier's name, relatively speaking. In Luther's day, everyone knew his name. But there is at least a formal parallel between the two thinkers which is worth pondering. In the midst of a profound societal crisis, namely, the environmental crisis, which few beside Si t tier at the time of his first writings had the prescience to notice, this latte rd ay disciple of Luther did precisely what Luther himself had done in the sixteenth century. He shut his eyes. He shut out the "social interpretation of reality" current in his day, taken for granted by most theologians as well as by most citizens of the modern Western world — and he listened to the Word of God with a radical devotion.

But the outcome was different. Luther, tutored by texts from Romans and Galatians concerning the justification of the sinner, remained within the matrix of his Ur erlebni s of hearing faith. He never sought to move out of the circle that began with the hearing of faith and completed itself with his espousal of a theology of the Word of God. That was sufficient in his time surely, for a theology of the Word of God was itself capable of c ommuni eating the message of justification by faith. It was a theology, after all, for persons, especially for persons who were profoundly disturbed in their subjectivity.

Sittier, in contrast, tutored by texts from Colossians and Ephesians concerning the unity of all things and the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ, discovered a new dimension, a more universal dimension, implicit within the matrix of his Urerlebnis. This was the dimension of seeing faith. His theology was therefore more expansive than Luther's. His theology took to flight. As his theological writings and speeches deftly sought to envision a new world, the circle of hearing faith spiraled outward and upward to become a universal vision projected by seeing faith. Sittier sought to portray what he called "the sheer fecundity of the reality of grace." (28)

Sittier heard in the Word about the "image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation," how "in him all things were created." (Col. 1 : 15 f f.) The Image! The hearing of faith thus elicted a new, although surely not unprecedented, seeing of faith. The result was not a new theology of the Word of God alone, although Sittier in intent, if not always in execution, always remained a faithful student of the Word of God. (29) The result, rather, was more comprehensive than a theology of the Word of God. It was a new theology of the Image of God -- understood now not in terms of Genesis 1, but Colossians 1, which is to say, christologically. As Sittier notes in Essays on Nat Uff and d Gfafe, he wanted " t o s e e t h e wo r l d [his italics] as the text speaks of it." (30) That he proceeded to do, as he wrote and spoke creatively on many subjects, for the rest of his life. Colossians 1:15 f f. became for him what Romans 1 :17 f . was for Luther. And, Sittier's interpretations brought to him much polemical heat, as Luther's interpretations also brought upon him the ire of many.

It was no accident, in this connection, that Sittier's insightful mind took him back, again and again, to the patristic teaching about Christ as Pantocrator, that is, to the figure of Christ as the ruler of all things. (31) This was the tradition, above all others, that envisioned Christ as the Image of God and which, in turn, incorporated a reverence for images — icons — in its liturgy and spirituality, as well as its theology.

Sittier himself recounts a kind, of modest T u r_m e r_ l e b n i s. of his own, which is worth noting here. In the context of his discussion of Christ as Pantocrator, he tells us: "In the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity at Zagorsk, Russia, during the Feast of the Dormition, standing for hours amidst the prayers of the faithful before the iconostasis with its Anton Ruble f f icons — literal presences of the 'mighty cloud of witnesses' — I came to understand a mode of Christ's reality that shattered assumptions about Western christologica1 comprehensiveness and beckoned toward partly forgotten dimensions of catholic Christo logy." (32)

Thus Sittier's theological program emerged. As Luther, having shut his eyes to listen to the Word in a time of crisis, sought to reconstruct the tormented inner world of the soul with his theology of the Word, so Sittier, having likewise shut his eyes to listen to the Word in a time of crisis, sought to reconstruct the threatened outer world of the species with his theology of the Image.

As he himself conceived the challenge before him, Sittier self-consciously sat at the feet of some modern seers of renown, whom he perceived to be responding to the same challenge. Picasso was one of these. "Here is a man of fantastic endowment, of disciplined craftsmanship," Sittier tells us, "a man who wants to find a truth by probing the possibilities of things. But everything about our time has struck and penetrated and disorganized older ways of seeing and stating." Hence, Sittier says, Picasso is driven to dissolve the old order and re-order it: "He tears apart an accustomed appearance and represents a strange appearance. He disengages the structural components of the anatomy of figures and things and reorders them in fresh designs." Picasso desired, Sittier concludes, "to fashion a new order, to bring to being a new cosmology from a shattered one." (33)

Gerard Manly Hopkins was another such seer, who was, surely, Sittier's artistic mentor more than any other. This was

undoubtedly because Hopkin's angle of vision, as he likewise sought to fashion a new order so that he could bring into being a new cosmology, was, unlike Picasso's, self-consciously and particulariseically Christian. Hopkins pursued his vision, indeed, with a self-consciously christo1ogica1 intent of universal scope, which undoubtedly spoke to Sittier all the more. (34) With Hopkin's obedience to grace, Sittier tells us, "all things became permeable to a new vision and demanded a holy evaluation." (35) Hopkins seeks a way "to set forth in outer reflection the inner nature of things," Sittier explains, "a quest for a language whereby a sense of the grace of creation might be evoked for the reader." (36)

To articulate this quest, Sittier explains, Hopkins invented a new terminology. When the eye sinks into the surprise and the particularity and the interior gift-quality of things, we behold them as £££.£.£.£.£.• "Behold," Sittier observes, is precisely the proper word in this context, not "look" -- as in the King James translation, "behold the lilies of the field." (60) In contemplating the inscape, Sittier continues, "one becomes aware of that energy of being by which all things are upheld, of that natural but ultimately supernatural stress which determines an inscape." (37)

Sittier quotes Hopkins' own words from a letter, to illustrate this dramatically visual artistic program: "I thought how sadly beauty of inscape was unknown and buried away from simple people and yet how near at hand it was if they had eyes to see it and it could be called out everywhere again." (38) This, it should be evident by now, was indeed Sittier's own richly nuanced, dramatically visual theological program: to show how near grace is, in all things, if only the faithful have eyes to see, and then to invite the faithful to see, as well as to hear.

We should be very careful to identify the particularity of Sittier's theological program at this point. The seeing is elicited by the hearing. The seeing does not prepare the way for the hearing. Sittier's program is quite different from the

agenda of any traditional "natural theology." He eschews speculation. He commends contemplation. He eschews looking. He commends beholding.

The difference is this, a point where Sittier self-consciously stands with Karl Barth, who also rejected the validity of any so-called natural theology, not unlike Luther himself. For Sittier, there is a "single center," from which all the meanings, vitalities, and claims of theological reflection are unfolded. That single center is the historical particularity of a community "affirming itself to be a community of the word of God — the word as Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier." (39) Having shut one's eyes in order to hear the Word in a time of crisis, in other words, one might then cautiously open them again to behold glimpses of a new cosmos, configured in the Image of God, which is the universal inscape of the very Grace which first claimed one through the Word of God.

Sittier's theology of nature, this reconstuction of the world that was inspired by seers such as Picasso and Hopkins, also calls to mind the spirituality of another seer, this one born of the hearty stock of the early American experience, Jonathan Edwards. So Edwards writes in his Personal Narrative:

> After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon.... and in the day, spend much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the mean time singing forth with a low voice my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer. (40)

One could imagine coming upon such a passage in an as-yet-to-be-unearthed journal of Joseph Sittier's adolescence or early

seminary years. For, while the public utterances of Sittier's mature years, in this respect, were much more restrained and urbane in their tonality than Edward's, Sittier's mature discourse surely leads us, by its many meandering courses, to the edge of the kind of vision that so captivated Edwards.

This is a new theology of glory, radically different from the one that Luther so vehemently rejected. This is a theology of glory that is profoundly shaped by the theology of the Cross. This seeing is emphatically passive. This is not a theology of hubris, of climbing up the ladder of human achievement or human speculation toward the Divine throne, in order to establish, as the people of Babel once attempted to do, a tower of power to be seen and applauded by all, and in order to be free from the anguish and the brokenness of this veil of tears. This rather is a theology of humility, of kneeling down before the lillies of the field in gentle contemplation, of withdrawing any claims that are driven by wi11-to-power, of waiting and watching and wondering in abject spiritual poverty, in order to catch some sight of "the dearest freshness deep down things," in a world where all too often "things fall apart" and "the center cannot hold" and "the blood-dimmed tide is loosed."

This is nor a natural theology. This is a theology of nature. This is Joseph Sittier's legacy to us all: the rhetoric of Grace and the vision of Grace, and the invitation to see, as well as to hear.(41)

NOTES

1. Sittier, Joseph, Essayson Natureand Grace (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972)1^ hereafter: Essays] , p. 15.

2 . Ibid . , p . 17.

3 . Ib i d . , p . 119.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 120.

6* Ibs^Iluwsii—i £Crisis o l£.g.y Is the name of a 1972 social statement and a study book of the Lutheran Church in America, ed. Franklin L. Jensen, Cedric W. Tilberg, to which Sittier contributed.

7. Sittier, Essays., pp. 116 f.

8. Buber, Martin, I and Thou, tr. Ronald G. Smith (2nd ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

9. See Santmire, H. Paul, "I-Thou, I-It, and I-Ens," Journal of Religion, 48:3 (July 1968), pp. 260-273.

10. I will bypass the question whether there is a certain kind of "dialogue" possible between humans and dogs or porpoises, etc., since the point I am making remains valid here, even if some kind of meaningful, reciprocal communication between humans and some other species can be demonstrated. Howevermuch affection my cat might hold for me, I do not anticipate that she will ever write a sonnet for me.

11. For a discussion of the emergence of a verbal culture in Luther's time, see Miles, Margaret Image as Insight:Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), chap. V.

12. Luther, Martin, Luther's Works., ed. Helmut Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955), vol. 19, 1.1. Quoted by Miles, op. cit., p. 152.

13. Ibid., 29.244. Quoted by Miles, op. cit., p. 95.

14. Luther, Martin, Weimar Ausgabe [hereafter WA], 48.48.

15. Luther, Martin, WA, 40, III, 75f.

16. Ibid., 47, 219.

17. As Erwin Panofsky once argued in his book Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism (Latrobe, PA: Archabbey Press, 1948).

18. Luther, Martin, WA. 14, 29.

19. Luther, Martin, W A^T R, no. 4774.

20. For the material in this paragraph, see Miles, op. cit., pp. 100-107. Luther was no dogmatic iconoclastic activist, surely, after the fashion of a Karlstadt. "I seek to tear [images] out of the hearts of all and want them despised and destroyed...," he explained. "I have allowed and not forbidden the outward removal of images, so long as this takes place without rioting and uproar and is done by the proper authorities." (Luther's Works, 40, 34. Quoted by Miles, £p j; c i t.. , P. H2)

21. See Miles, op. cit., pp. 104f.

22. See Miles, op^ cit., p. 101.

23. Luther, Martin, WA 10.143

24. Ibid., 19.496.

25. Luther, Martin, WA-TR, no. 1160.

26. Ib id..

27. See Santmi re, H. Paul, The_Travail_of Nature:t he Ambiguous. Ecologicald Promise_of_Christian_Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), chap. 7.

28. Sittier, Essays, pp. 4 6ff.

29. Indeed, he first gained prominence in Lutheran circles by

offering a series of lectures latter published with the title, The Doctrine of the Word (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943).

30. Sittier, Essays, p. 42.

31. Ibid., pp. 5 2 f f.

32. Ib i d . , pp. 5 5 f .

33. Sittier, Joseph TheAnguish of Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) [hereafter: AP], p. 57.

34. Cf. Nathan A Scott, Jr. "The Poetry and Theology of Earth: Reflections on the Testimony of Joseph Sittier and Gerard Manly Hopkins," Journal of Religion, 54 (April 1974), p. 112: For Hopkins, "the Incarnate Word or Christ is the real pattern on which all things are made.... He is that first Inscape which is being adumbrated by all the inscapes of this world...."

35. Sittier, AP, p. 54.

36 . Ibid . , pp . 59 f.

37 . Ib £<1. , pp . 6 Of.

38 . Ibid .

39 . Ibid . , p . 6 3.

40 . Quoted by Miles, op. c it., p. 2.

41. This theology of hearing and see^ faith has broad-ranging implications for the life of the Church, some of which Sittier explicitly identified, others which remain to be articulated. What one £££££ in the liturgy or in the church building or while praying (must one always pray with one's eyes closed?), can no longer be regarded as a peripheral question having to do with "adiaphora." If the church's liturgy is its mode of

1 den11 ty-formation , then the faithful should be encouraged to s_e£ glimpses of the glory of the Lord — in each other's faces, in the sacramental elements, in the liturgical actions generally, and in the architectural shape and the iconography of the liturgical space. Likewise for the church's pedagogy and ministry of spiritual formation: the faithful should be encouraged to see glimpses of the glory of the Lord refracted in hospitable residential and work spaces, in the great cultural monuments of our civilization, in the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, in thunderstorms and mountain ranges, in the dawning sun and the starry night. This concern for seeing has a place in the church's moral praxis and public witness, too. It is not enough to tell the faithful what to do or how to witness, and why. They must be shown, by visible example, and by the projection of a tangible moral vision which can serve as the ultimate goal of their personal and public decision-making.

For a general discussion of the church's relationship to nature, see Santmire, H. Paul, Brother Earth:Nature ,God ,an d Ecology in a Time of Crisis (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1970), and more particularly, Santmire, H. Paul, "The Future of the Cosmos and the Renewal of the Church's Life with Nature," Word and Wo£l_d_, 4:4 (1986), pp. 410-421 [reprinted in Cosmosas Creation: Science and Technology in Consonance, ed. Ted Peters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989)].